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BENEATH THE BOOK TOWER

AN
ALEX McKNIGHT
SHORT STORY



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STEVE HAMILTON

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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We were driving down Woodward, just past midnight. It was the third watch. The night shift. Franklin and me in the car. This is going back, you understand. I mean way back. I was still a cop, I was still married, Franklin's second daughter hadn't even been born yet. I was what, seven years into the job that summer, Franklin maybe five. So twelve years seniority between the two of us and yet we were still pulling nights. On account of the hiring freeze, the city running out of money like it did at least once a decade. No more new cops, no more new vehicles, no more new anything for anybody.

God, it was hot that night.

"Now, wait a minute," Franklin said to me. "Are you telling me this place is in *Michigan*? And it's called *Paradise*?"

"It's a real place, yes."

"How come I never heard of it before?"

"It's way the hell up there," I said. "On Lake Superior."

"What, you mean in the UP?"

"That's what I'm telling you. All the way up there."

"What's up there? Just little cabins by the water?"

"A few of those, yeah. A lot of trees."

It was a hot, hot summer night, and cars were cruising up and down the street, all around us. Everybody noticed us. Everybody maintaining their cool but keeping one eye on us at all times, taking note of our location and direction of travel, the way you keep your eye on a bumblebee in the corner of the room.

"What do you do for fun up there?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I never had any fun up there myself. I just helped my old man build his first log house."

"Is he still up there?"

"He's working on number six now. His masterpiece, he calls it."

"Sounds impressive," Franklin said. "Maybe I'll get to see it someday. Never even been over that bridge, believe it or not."

"You've lived in this state your whole life," I said, "and you've never once been over the Mackinac Bridge?"

"I'm not sure they even let black people up there, am I right? Don't they stop them and direct them back to Detroit?"

This is the kind of thing Franklin would say. Making a joke out of it but at the same time you could tell there was a grain of hard truth inside. He was born in this city, grew up here, played high school football at Cass Tech. If he hadn't been given oversized physical gifts, there's no telling where he would have ended up. Maybe on these same streets we were rolling down tonight. But the game was his

ticket. He went to the University of Michigan on a full scholarship, played three years on the offensive line until he got hurt. Missed out on his red-shirt senior year but kept his promise to his mother and graduated. Then he went to the academy and became a Detroit cop. He was still hovering somewhere around his playing weight of 260 pounds, and he never looked comfortable wedged in behind that steering wheel. But tonight it was my turn to drive anyway, so he sat in the passenger's seat and watched the night go by through his window.

Me, I was a baseball player. Which meant we had our own little running argument about which sport was the hardest to play. Every night another round in the ongoing debate. But not tonight. For whatever reason, Franklin had a whole different vibe going on. Maybe because his wife was getting close to delivering that second daughter. Or maybe because of the "mission" he was set on accomplishing that night. He hadn't told me anything about it. Which wasn't unusual. He just said he had a favor he wanted to get to when we had a chance and left it at that.

"So what's with the name, anyway?" he said. "Paradise? What makes it Paradise?"

"There's a shipwreck museum up the road," I said. "And some nice waterfalls."

He looked over at me. "That's it?"

"It gets a lot of snow."

"So far you're not really describing a place I'd call Paradise."

I gave him a shrug. "I didn't name it."

"Your old man seems to like it, though, huh? He lives up there all year long? Even in the winter?"

"Ever since he retired."

"Some people don't have the sense to go south when they retire? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Some white people, you mean?"

"I didn't say that."

That's the kind of line that would usually have got him going, but like I said, tonight was different. He just shook his head and we kept on rolling down Woodward.

There seemed to be more people than usual out on the streets that night. There was another bus strike going on. That might have had something to do with it. On top of it being way too hot and the air being heavy and wet even after midnight.

That was a bad summer. No other way to say it. I always hated hearing people complain about the place, especially if they were outsiders who didn't really see anything past the raw numbers, but I knew what those numbers said. The unemployment rate. The murder

rate. I knew where we stood on the national rankings that summer. Dead last behind every other city in the country.

This was our town. The Motor City. We all knew how far it had fallen from its glory days. Believe me, we knew it, every single one of us. Right down to the bone.

"There it is," Franklin said. As if either of us needed one more reminder, we were passing the old Hudson's department store there on Woodward Avenue, once the second largest in the country, behind only Macy's in New York City.

"That's where Santa Claus lived," Franklin said, looking up at the darkened windows. Another odd thing for him to say, maybe, but I knew exactly what he was talking about. As a kid I'd go there with my father, and the woman operating the elevator would announce what you could buy on each floor. After Thanksgiving, the very top floor was reserved for Santa Claus. The real Santa Claus, not the fakes out ringing their bells on the street corners.

"And Batman," Franklin said, "he lived up over there." He pointed up toward the far corner of the windshield.

"Where are you talking about?"

"The Book Tower. That's where Batman lived when I was eight years old."

I didn't have to look out the window to see it. Again, I knew exactly what he was talking about. A few blocks down from us, the Book Building and its infamous tower. My father had told me the story behind it on one of our trips downtown, and he had even brought a pair of binoculars so I could really see it. Way up there on the tower, some forty stories off the ground where you could hardly even see it, the crazy architect hired by the Book brothers had put a dozen sculptures of women and a green copper roof on top, and because the guy had forgotten to put in a second set of stairs he had to rig up an external fire escape as an afterthought. Like anybody would actually go out on that thing, that far up. The building was a national laughingstock, my father had told me, but it was kind of beautiful in its own ridiculous way.

So yeah, I had to admit it. Young eight-year-old Franklin had a good point. If Batman lived in Detroit, the Book Tower is exactly where he would have ended up. Sitting outside on one of those intricately carved ledges, watching the whole city below.

"Okay, so we've got Santa Claus and Batman covered," I said. "Is there anybody else? Does Godzilla live around here somewhere?"

"Looks like he's already been here. Stomped the shit out of this place and moved on."

We were going west now, leaving downtown behind us, the whole city laid out with the streets that emanated from the center like spokes

on a wheel. As we swung close to the river I could see the wide monolith of the train station up ahead. Michigan Central Station, another great old building my father took me to see. Twenty stories high, at one time the tallest train station in the world, with the three soaring archways in the front and the big main room with the columns to make it resemble an ancient Roman bathhouse. What a miracle this place was, here on the shores of the Detroit River with a thousand lights from Windsor, Ontario, blinking behind it.

"They'll close this place down, too," Franklin said. "You watch."

"No way," I said. "It's a national historic place, or whatever the hell you call it. It's protected, I mean."

"That won't mean nothing when the time comes."

I looked over at him. "Are you gonna tell me where I'm going yet?"

"Just drive," he said. "West side. I'll let you know when we're close."

I drove. As I cut back to Michigan Avenue, we could both see the Book Tower looming ahead of us.

"There's Batman's lair again," he said. "Looks like there's one light on up there."

"He's planning his next move," I said. "I'm glad he's on our side."

"I wish he'd hurry his ass up. We could use the help."

We passed by Tiger Stadium. It was dark tonight with the team out of town. When we were out of Corktown, Franklin had me pull off the main road and drive down a residential street. We passed by a burnt-out house. Then another. Then another house that was empty. Maybe this one would burn one day, too. On Devil's Night, the night before Halloween, that's when it would happen.

"In case you hadn't noticed," I said, "we're not even in our precinct anymore. I don't think it's too much to ask to know where the hell we're going."

"We're here." I pulled up in front of the first house that actually looked intact and lived in. There were lights on inside, and there were plastic lawn chairs sitting out front in the tiny yard. Franklin grunted as he climbed out of the car and stood in the street. I waited a couple of beats, then I joined him.

"You said something about a favor," I said to him. "I assume this is the lucky recipient."

"Show some respect," he said. "This is the street I grew up on."

I looked both ways and counted maybe three houses that seemed occupied, out of a dozen on the block. "Which house?"

"Down that way," he said. "One of those empty lots. House is gone now."

He knocked on the door.

“This is Mrs. Treille we’re gonna see,” he said, pronouncing the name like “trial.” “I just want to say hello, and tell her we’ll be keeping an eye out for Antoine.”

“Antoine would be, what, her son?”

“Grandson.”

The door opened then. A woman looked out at us. She was wearing a batik dress, and her hair was wrapped up in a scarf. She didn’t look much older than fifty.

“Franklin, it’s been so long,” she said, giving him a hug. I could hear a slight Caribbean lilt in her voice. “Just look at you in that uniform.”

“Yeah, I’m a sight and a half, I’m sure.”

“And who’s your friend here?”

“That’s no friend, that’s my partner,” he said, smiling for the first time that night. “His name’s Alex.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, taking my hand. “Why don’t you boys come in?”

We did that. We sat down in her little living room, and I could see in just those first few moments that she was fighting her own battle against all of the chaos, right here in this little house. She had rugs over the bare floors and a small television in one corner. A single fan stood in an open window, drawing in the night air and making it just cool enough to be tolerable.

“When’s the last time you saw your grandson?” Franklin said, getting right down to business.

“Two days ago. Yes, Tuesday. Tuesday morning.”

“Did he give you any indication he wasn’t going to be home for a couple days?”

“No,” she said. “Can I get you gentlemen something to drink?”

“No, we’re good. We should get back out there. Is there anybody in particular he’s running with these days? Somebody we could ask?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m sorry. There’s a whole bunch of kids come by, but they don’t say much to me. They’re not real respectful.”

“Yeah, no, I don’t imagine they are.”

“They never use his real name. They call him T-Bird or T-Ball or something. They act like I’m not even here.”

“How old is he now?” Franklin said. “Fifteen?”

“He’ll be fifteen in September. Used to be that still made you a child.”

“Used to be, yes. I hear that.”

“I’ve been raising him myself,” she said, looking over at me. I was sitting on an old kitchen chair that was serving as living room furniture. I had my hat in my hands.

“I can’t imagine that’s very easy,” I said. I wasn’t sure what else I

could even try to say.

"No, it surely isn't. But you do what you can do. Every single day."

She was right, of course. You do what you can do. That's all anybody could ever ask. We didn't stay much longer, but out of this whole night I want to make sure I remember this one part correctly. The two of us in our uniforms, sitting there in the room with this woman. The way she was looking after her grandson, like so many other women in this city. All by themselves.

She's the one bright spot I think of when I think back to that night. She was the reason I became a cop and the reason I became a cop in Detroit. In the end, she was the kind of person who made this whole wreck of a city feel like it was worth saving.

"We'll keep an eye out," Franklin said. "We promise."

"Yes," I said. "We will."

She looked us up and down, and I could see the worry turning into pure shivering dread. She knew what was out there waiting for her grandson or for any other fifteen-year-old.

"You let me know, okay? Any time of the night, you call me. Or better yet, just bring him on home if you find him."

"We'll do that, Mrs. Treille. You try not to worry."

"I don't know if that's possible," she said. "But I appreciate you stopping by. It's so good to see you again."

"Yes, ma'am. You, too."

We said our good-byes and went back outside. A low-slung car came rumbling down the street, rap music blaring and the bass notes threatening to crack the pavement. Franklin gave the occupants a hard stare, but they gave it right back to him and kept on rolling. He stood watching the car until it disappeared. Then he got in the patrol car.

"I take it you and Mrs. Treille go way back," I said.

"I went to school with her daughter. We went out a couple of times."

I did the math in my head. Franklin wasn't even thirty years old yet. If Mrs. Treille's daughter had a fifteen-year-old son now, that meant she was not even that old when she had him.

"Where is she now?" I asked.

He shook his head and made a quick dismissing wave with his hand. Meaning he didn't know, or it didn't matter anymore, or that she was long gone and there was no use even talking about it. Surprising from a man who could find at least a few hundred words to say about any topic at all.

We got a call on the radio then. There was real police work for us to do that night, apart from doing favors and keeping promises. That's how the night shift worked. Two, three hours of nothing and then all of a sudden you would find yourself in the middle of a calamity.

There was a fight going on outside a bar, back on Woodward. I flipped on the lights and we ran silent. Back east on Michigan Avenue, past the stadium again, all the way to the center of downtown. There was another car already parked in front of the bar when we pulled up. Two other Detroit cops were already talking to two different participants in whatever kind of altercation had taken place. One of the men had a thin trail of blood coming down one side of his face. The other was in handcuffs. Both men were clearly still agitated and talking a few thousand words a minute.

Franklin and I helped calm everybody down, and we made sure nobody else got any ideas about starting their own little secondary skirmishes. Too often these things end up like a hockey game, with one fight quickly turning into five fights.

When everything was settled and one man was sent on his way to find bandages and the other packed into the back of a squad car, Franklin spotted two kids standing nearby. He went over to ask them if either of them had seen Antoine Treille lately, but they put their hands up and walked away.

"Everybody knows everybody in this town," he said to me when we were back in our car. "We just need to find the right kid to talk to us."

"Good luck on that one."

As he drove, Franklin kept scanning the streets, asking me to slow down every time he saw another group of kids standing around on a corner. He'd roll down his window and shout at the kids, and more often than not they'd just turn their backs on him.

It was going to be one hell of a long night.



About an hour later, we were over on the east side, in a forgotten part of town where the buildings thinned out almost completely and there were actual fields of scrubby grass and weeds, and here in the middle of the nothingness rose St. Cyril's, this great Catholic church, grand and ornate in its day but now just a boarded-up shell with faded paint and broken stained-glass windows. Just one more of the many ruins of Detroit.

"Looks like somebody's having some fun over there," Franklin said. As I took the right on Van Dyke I saw who he was talking about. A white man in a dress shirt, standing behind his BMW, struggling with something in the trunk. The left rear end was hoisted up on a jack and the tire was off.

I pulled up behind him. As we got out of the car, he spun around with a look of sheer terror on his face. Like this is it, I'm about to be

mugged, raped, then killed, in that order. He dialed it back about halfway when he saw our uniforms, but his hands were still shaking, and he gave the spare tire a great yank until it just about bowled him over.

Franklin went up to the tire he had taken off and gave it a kick. "Need some help, sir?"

"Hell of a place to get a flat, huh? But thanks, I think I'm good."

Franklin flashed me a quick look. If a man with a flat tire refuses your help, there's usually a good reason.

"How'd you end up here, anyway?" Franklin said. "Were you on your way somewhere?"

"Just on my way home," the man said, not looking up. He had the spare tire mounted now, and he was fumbling with the lug nuts. "I guess I kinda got lost."

"What, were you on the expressway?"

"On Ninety-four, yeah. Just going home."

"How'd you end up all the way up here if you were on the expressway?"

The man was turning the first lug nut, and I could tell he was wishing he had one of those superfast power tools they have at the racetracks. Ten-second pit stop and then you're on your way, no time to answer any questions, thank you, officer, have a nice night.

"No," the man said, "I mean yes. I had to get off because I had to find a bathroom. Real bad. You know how it is. Then I guess I just took a wrong turn getting back."

"Reason I ask is, we've got people who come in from the suburbs and they cruise up and down some of our streets, looking to buy drugs. It's a bad situation for everyone involved, I'm sure you'd agree."

The man turned one shade whiter. "That's not what I'm doing, Officer. I swear to God."

"You mind if I take a quick look in your car to make sure?"

"What? I mean—"

"If you haven't done anything, then we're cool, right?"

This is where any man with an ounce of sense or any understanding of the law would refuse the search, but it never failed to amaze me. Ten minutes later, he was sitting on the curb while Franklin pulled a small plastic bag of powder cocaine out of the center console. I went ahead and finished changing his tire, even if it was just to make it easier for somebody to tow the car to the impound lot.

Franklin called another car to come pick up the man and take him downtown. I knew Franklin didn't want to be tied up for the next hour processing him. Not on this night. Even as the man was being taken away, I could see him looking up the street at two more kids crossing

at the stoplight. It was almost 2:00 A.M. now.

We got in the car, and as we rolled up to the two kids he opened his window and flagged them down. Two more black kids, fourteen, maybe fifteen. No older than that. They both had jeans shorts on, oversized white shirts with gold crowns. Brand-new Nikes.

"Hold up, guys," Franklin said. I stopped the car and he got out. "Either you guys seen Antoine Treille?"

"Don't know who you mean," the one kid said.

"T-Bird, they call him, right?"

"You mean T-Bill."

"So you *do* know him."

"I might," the kid said. "Depends on what you want him for."

"Just looking for him," Franklin said. "His grandmother is worried about him."

The second kid smirked at that one, but the first kid kept a straight face. "I understand he was meeting somebody tonight, to administer a certain amount of ass-whupping. That's what I heard, anyway."

"Do you happen to know where this amount of ass-whupping was going to happen?"

"Nuh-uh," the kid said. "Sorry I can't be more helpful to you."

"How 'bout you?" Franklin said to the second kid. "You know anything more?"

"I knew about your mama earlier tonight, that's about it."

Franklin probably outweighed both of these kids put together, these fourteen- or fifteen-year-old children out on the streets in the middle of the night when they should have been home in bed, getting some sleep so they could get up early for school. Instead they were out there hustling, and I knew there wasn't much we could do about it. I knew it and they knew it, because that was the whole point of having kids do the legwork. We could bring them in, but because of their age they'd be back out on the streets within a few hours. Meanwhile, the handful of men running the drug trade in this town would be safe at home, completely untouchable. We'd hear rumors of federal cases being put together, built slowly from the ground up, brick by brick. But meanwhile the whole operation kept grinding away, one long useless night after another.

Now, if Batman was really in that Book Tower, he'd have a different approach to the problem, right? He wouldn't have to play by the same rules. He'd find the real criminals behind everything and he'd exact his own vengeance, Batman style. On a night like this, I had to admit, the whole idea was appealing.

"We just ran some guy in a BMW," Franklin said to that second kid, instead of folding him up and stuffing him down a sewer grate. "Any chance you were the hotshots who sold him the powder?"

“You got nothing,” the kid said. He was right. “Go find T-Bill and take him home to his grandmama.”

The kids turned their backs on him and started walking away. For a moment I thought Franklin might do something rash, but sanity prevailed and he came back to the car.

“Punk-ass little bitches,” he said under his breath. “Talking to me that way.”

“It sounds like Antoine’s out looking for trouble tonight,” I said. “Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“Lord knows. If you really want trouble, you can find it pretty much anywhere.”

“Well, you’re right about that.”

“Except maybe that town you were talking about,” he said.

“Paradise? That’s really in the same state as Detroit?”

“It is. But I bet you can still find trouble up there if you really want to.”

He shook his head as I put the car in gear and pulled away. We weren’t more than five minutes down the road when the call came in. Shots fired. Grand Boulevard, in the old Packard plant. We were already on the east side of town, not more than a mile or two away, so I flipped on the lights and siren and we tore through the night.

Franklin picked up the radio and told them we were responding. When we got down there, I parked the car in the middle of the plant, where the old walkway passes over the street. Out of all the ruins in Detroit, this was the king. Thirty-five sprawling acres of it, this plant where they once made the most beautiful automobiles the world has ever seen. Now it’s just empty buildings with graffiti on the outside and collapsing floors on the inside. Sumac trees growing up through the holes in the roof. Garbage, rats, broken glass. I chased my share of young vandals and thrill-seekers out of that old wreck, believe me. We all did. But tonight there were shots fired, and that meant a whole different level of police work. Hell, maybe it was just a couple of kids taking target practice, but the way this night was going, I didn’t think we’d get that lucky.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Franklin said. “This place is a city in itself.”

“More cars are on the way.”

“Why can’t they do this shit in the daylight, anyway?”

We both got out and stood by the car for a moment. Our lights were still flashing, and we could see the blues and reds reflected in what was left of the glass. We weren’t hearing any shots now, but just then a lone figure crossed the street in front of us, maybe two blocks away.

I started after him, with Franklin close behind. After all our

arguments about which sport had the superior athletes, this was my chance to show that a former catcher can outrun a former offensive lineman. The prize being getting to the end of the street first and having a much better chance of being shot in the head.

As I got closer, I saw the kid jump the fence and head into the plant. Another squad car was coming up the street now, but it was still a few blocks away. With Franklin fading behind me, I was still very much the lead man. I jumped the fence in the same spot and felt the top edge catch on my pants for one terrible moment. I could feel myself falling straight down on my face, but then the fabric tore and I was free. I landed on my feet.

“Police!” I yelled. “Stop right there!”

But the kid had already pushed through the door and was inside the building. As I shouldered open the same door, I saw the broken padlock. Now I was in darkness, a completely stupid move on my part. I felt a wall on my left and I put my back up against it, catching my breath and waiting for my eyes to adjust. When they did I could see that part of the ceiling had caved in, and it made a sort of courtyard, with the light from the moon coming down and making everything glow. There was an old refrigerator and a baby carriage and a million other pieces of trash from God knows where.

“I know you’re in here,” I said. “Just come out now so nobody gets hurt, okay?”

There was no answer, but then soon after that I heard the clang of metal on metal and I knew he was close.

“If you have a gun, put it down,” I said. “Step out and keep your hands where I can see them.”

I waited to see movement. From somewhere behind me, I could hear Franklin laboring to get over the fence. I was thinking I should wait for him to show up so we could have this kid outnumbered, but then I saw the gun barrel. He was hiding behind a concrete column, maybe twenty feet away, and he was about to turn the corner and fire on me.

“Drop the gun now!”

I went into a crouch and held the gun with both hands, taking dead aim at the exact spot where his chest would be in another half second. But then I saw the gun falling to the ground. The kid stepped out with both hands up. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt despite the heat. A suitable place to hide a gun, no doubt. He was wearing a Tiger baseball cap. He couldn’t have been older than fourteen, I swear to God.

“Okay, turn around and keep your hands in the air,” I said. “Then walk backwards to the sound of my voice.”

He tried to comply, but there was too much garbage on the floor to

walk backwards without killing yourself. I told him to stop. That's when Franklin came into the room.

"Is this your man?" I said to him.

"Turn around," Franklin said.

The kid turned around.

"That's not him. That's not Antoine."

I saw the kid's eyes narrow. Something was going through his head.

"Have you seen Antoine tonight?" I said, thinking maybe this was the kid who had the appointment to get the ass-whupping. "Have you seen T-Bill?"

The kid didn't answer. He didn't move a muscle.

Another car pulled up just outside the building. We could hear the squawk of the radio. Something else was happening, on the other side of the plant. I had a bad feeling about it. I knew Franklin did, too.

By the time we got over there, they had already put a sheet over Antoine's body. There wouldn't be any kind of high-tech CSI forensics going on here. No footprints or fibers or angle of entry. It was just one more kid shot dead by another kid on another summer night. Nothing that would even make the back page of the newspaper.

As Franklin walked up to the body, he asked one of the other cops to pull back the sheet. I stood next to him as he looked down at Antoine's face. These kids pretend to be such grown-up bad-asses, but the spell breaks and it all drains away when they're lying on the ground like that and you can see them as children again.

"I never got to meet him," Franklin said. His voice was so soft only I could hear it. "I never saw him after she left."

I looked over at him. He was staring at the kid's face, and I could see this was something more than anything I'd been imagining that night, going straight back to that odd silence he held on the subject of Antoine's mother.

"I always wondered," he said.

"What are you talking about?" I said, although I think I already knew the answer.

"I never got to ask her," he said. "But I always wanted to know."

"Franklin..."

He looked at me finally. "Guess it doesn't even matter now, huh?"

I didn't know what to say to him. So I just kept standing there next to him while they covered up the kid again, and then loaded his body into the back of the ambulance and drove away.



There was nothing else to be done that night. Nothing else but a long

drive back to the other side of town, to give Antoine's grandmother the news. Franklin tried to tell me he could do it on his own, but there was no way I was going to let him do that. We went over there together.

It was our last full summer on the job, now that I look back on it. Within another year, Franklin would be gone. His two daughters would grow up without a father. I'd be off the force with three holes in my chest and a bullet still sitting a centimeter away from my heart. A divorce. My father would die. Then I'd go up to Paradise intending to sell off his cabins. Instead, I'd feel something about the place, something that matched the way I was feeling inside, and I'd stay.

I don't get down to Detroit much anymore. But I know they finally tore down the Hudson's on Woodward. They imploded it from within, and days later they were still cleaning up the dust for blocks all around it.

They tore down St. Cyril's, too. Hell, they even tore down Tiger Stadium. But the Packard plant is still there. It's thirty-five acres, after all. Maybe it's just too big to tear down. Maybe it'll be there forever.

Oh, and Franklin was right about the train station. He didn't live to see it, but they did close the place down a few years later. Now it's like some kind of ghostly black monolith on the edge of the river, all of those windows broken now, every last goddamned one of them. The stone accents torn off, the wiring and the copper pipes stripped from the interior. The whole place gutted and vandalized and turned into a broken wreck. They keep talking about what a treasure it is and how they need to restore it, but for now it's just sitting there in some kind of limbo between death and life.

Like the city itself? Yeah, I know. I get it. But like I said at the very beginning, I hate to hear people complain about Detroit. I saw the place at its worst, God knows. But I saw the good things, too. Believe it or not, I still love that city. It keeps getting knocked down, but the city gets back up every time. The city keeps on fighting. No matter what.

Yeah, that was one night in my life as a cop in Detroit. A long time ago.

I almost forgot, but the Book Tower? I hear it's closed up now, too. It hasn't fallen apart yet, and apparently they might reopen it again soon. For now, it's dark. It must be a strange sight, especially those Gothic upper floors with the carvings and everything else, so high above the ground but with absolutely no signs of life.

Batman's not in the Book Tower now, that much is obvious. He never was. He never will be. He'll never swoop down in the middle of the night to help the city.

Detroit, as always, you are on your own.

The following is an excerpt from MISERY BAY by Steve Hamilton

MISERY BAY

STEVE HAMILTON



MINOTAUR BOOKS

A Thomas Dunne Book

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Part One

Chapter One

It is the third night of January, two hours past midnight, and everyone is in bed except this man. He is young and there's no earthly reason for him to be here on this shoreline piled with snow with a freezing wind coming in off of Lake Superior, the air so cold here in this lonely place, cold enough to burn a man's skin until he becomes numb and can no longer feel anything at all.

But he is here in this abandoned dead end near the water's edge, twenty-six miles from his home near the college. Twenty-six miles from his warm bed. He is outside his car, with the driver's side door still open and the only light the glow of the dashboard. The headlights are off. The engine is still running.

He is facing the lake, the endless expanse of water. It is not frozen because a small river feeds into the lake here and the motion is enough to keep the ice from forming. A miracle in itself, because otherwise this place feels like the coldest place in the whole world.

The rope is tight around his neck. He swings only slightly in the wind from the lake. The snow will come soon and it will cover the ground along with the car and the crown of his lifeless head.

He will hang here from the branch of this tree for almost thirty-six hours, until his car runs out of gas and the battery dies and his face turns blue from the cold. A man on a snowmobile will finally see him through the trees. He'll make a call on his cell phone and an hour later two deputies will arrive on the scene and the young man will be lowered to the ground.

On that night, I know nothing of this young man or this young man's death. Or what may have led him to tie that noose and to slip it around his neck. I am not there to see it, God knows, and I won't even hear of it until three months later. I live on the shores of the same lake but it would take me five hours to find this place they call Misery Bay. Five hours of driving down empty roads with a good map to find a part of the lake I'd never even heard of.

That's how big this lake is.

"It's not the biggest lake in the world. You guys do know that, right?"

The man was wearing a pink snowmobile suit. He didn't sound like he was from downstate Michigan. Probably Chicago, or one of the rich

suburbs just outside of Chicago. The snowmobile suit probably set him back at least five hundred dollars, one of those space-age polymer waterproof-but-breathable suits you find in a catalog, and I'm sure the color was listed as "coral" or "shrimp" or "sea foam" or some such thing. But to me it was as pink as a girl's nursery.

"I mean, I don't want to be a jerk about it and all, but that's all I hear up here. How goddamned big Lake Superior is and how it's the biggest, deepest lake in the world. You guys know it's not, right? That's all I'm saying."

Jackie stopped wiping the glass he was holding. Jackie Connery, the owner of the place, looking and sounding for all time like he just stepped red-faced off a fishing boat from the Outer Hebrides, even if he'd been living here in the Upper Peninsula for over forty years now. Jackie Connery, the man who still drove across the bridge once a week to buy me the real thing, Molson Canadian, brewed in Canada. Not the crap they bottle here in the States and criminally try to pass off as the same thing.

Jackie Connery, the man who wasn't born here, who didn't grow up here. The man who still couldn't cope with the long winters, even after forty years. The one man you did not want to poke with a sharp stick in January or February or March. Or any kind of stick, sharp or dull. Not until the sun came out and he could at least imitate a normal human being again.

"What's that you're saying now?" He was looking at the man in the pink snowmobile suit with a Popeye squint in his right eye. The poor man had no idea what that look meant.

"I'm just saying, you know, to set the record straight. Lake Superior is not the biggest lake in the world. Or the deepest."

Jackie put the glass down and stepped forward. "So which particular lake, pray tell, are you going to suggest is bigger?"

The man leaned back on his stool, maybe two inches.

"Well, technically, that would be the Caspian Sea."

"I thought we were talking about *lakes*."

"Technically speaking. That's what I'm saying. The Caspian Sea is technically a lake and not a sea."

"And it's bigger than Lake Superior."

"Yes," the man said. "Definitely."

"The water in the Caspian Sea," Jackie said, "is it saltwater or fresh?"

The man swallowed. "It's saltwater."

"Okay, then. If it's *technically* a lake, then it's the biggest, deepest *saltwater* lake in the world. Apples and oranges, am I right? Can we agree on that much?"

Jackie turned, and the man should have let it go. But he didn't.

“Well, actually, no.”

Jackie stopped.

“Lake Baikal,” the man said. “In Russia. That’s fresh water. And it’s way deeper than Lake Superior.”

“In Russia, you said? Is that where it is?”

“Lake Baikal, yes. I don’t know if it has a bigger surface area, but I know it’s got a lot more water in it. Like twice as much as Lake Superior. So really, in that respect, it’s twice as big.”

Jackie nodded his head, like this was actually an interesting fact he had just learned instead of the most ridiculous statement ever uttered by a human being. It would have been like somebody telling him that Mexico is actually more Scottish than Scotland.

I was sitting by the fireplace, of course. On a cold morning on the last day of March, after cutting some wood and touching up the road with my plow, where else would I be? But either way I was close enough to hear the whole exchange, and right about then I was hoping we’d all find a way to end it peacefully.

The man in the pink snowmobile suit started fishing for his wallet. Jackie raised a hand to stop him.

“Don’t even bother, sir. Your money’s no good here.”

The man looked over at me this time, as if I could actually help him.

“A man as smart as you,” Jackie said, “it’ll be my honor to buy you a drink.”

“Well, okay, but come on, don’t you—”

“Are you riding today?”

“Uh, yeah,” the man said, looking down at his suit. Like what the hell else would he be doing?

“Silly me. Of course you are. So why don’t you head back on out there while we still have some snow left.”

“It is pretty light this year. Must be global warming or something.”

“Global warming, now. So you mean like our winter might last ten months instead of eleven? Is that the idea? You’re like a walking library of knowledge, I swear.”

“Listen, is there a problem here? Because I don’t—”

“No, no,” Jackie said. “No problem. You go on out and enjoy your ride. In fact, you know what? I hear they’ve got a lot more snow in Russia this year. Up by that real big lake. What was it called again?”

The man didn’t answer.

“Lake Baikal,” I said.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Alex.”

“Just trying to help.”

“I’m leaving,” the man said, already halfway to the door. “And I won’t be back.”

“When you get to that lake, do me a favor, huh? I’m still not convinced it’s deeper, so can you drive your snowmobile and let it sink to the bottom with you still on it? You think you could do that? I’d really appreciate it.”

The man slammed the door behind him. Another drinking man turned away for life, not that he’d have any other place to go in Paradise, Michigan. Jackie picked up his towel and threw it at me. I ignored him and turned back to the fire.

They have long, long winters up here. Did I mention that yet? By the time the end of March drags around, everyone’s just a few degrees past crazy. Not just Jackie.

The sun was trying to come out as I was driving back up my road. It was an old unpaved logging road, with banks of snow lingering on either side. When the snow started to melt, the road would turn to mud and I’d have a whole new set of problems to deal with. By the time it dried out, it would be time for black fly season.

I passed Vinnie’s cabin first. Vinnie “Red Sky” LeBlanc, my only neighbor and maybe my only true friend. Meaning the one person who truly understood me, who never wanted anything from me, and who never tried to change me.

I passed by the first cabin, the one my father and I had built a million years ago—before I went off to play baseball and then become a cop—then the next four cabins, each bigger than the one before it, until I got to the end of the road. There stood the biggest cabin of all, looking almost as good as the original. I’d been rebuilding it for the past year, starting with just the fireplace and chimney my father had built stone by stone. Now it was almost done. Now it was almost as good as it was before somebody burned it down.

I parked the truck and went inside. Vinnie was already there, on his hands and knees in the corner of the kitchen, once again working harder and longer than I ever did myself, making me feel like my debt to him was more than I could ever repay.

“What are you ruining now?” I said to him.

“I’m fixing the trim you put down on this floor.” He was in jeans and a white T-shirt, his denim jacket hanging on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. He had a long strip of quarter round molding in his hand, the very same strip I had just tacked down the day before.

“You’re ripping it up? How is that fixing it?”

“You used the wrong size trim. You need to start over.”

“It’s not the wrong size. Damn it, Vinnie, is it any wonder it’s taking me forever to finish this place? You wanna rip the ceiling off, too?”

"You got a good half-inch gap here," he said, pointing to the gap between the floor and the lowest log on the wall.

"That's a quarter inch."

"Here it might be, but over on the other side of the room it gets wider. You have to measure the gap at its longest before you go out and buy your trim."

"Vinnie, what the hell's wrong with you?"

"I told you, you bought the wrong size. And as long as you're buying new molding, get something with a little more style, too. Quarter round is boring."

"Nobody's going to notice it. It's on the floor, for God's sake."

He turned away from me, shaking his head. He grabbed another length of molding and ripped it up like he was pulling weeds.

"Something's eating at you," I said. "I can tell."

"I'm fine. I just wish you'd do things right for a change."

First Jackie and now Vinnie. Such a parade of cheerful people in my life. I was truly a lucky man.

"It's actually trying to get nice outside," I said. "We might even have some sunlight soon. Will that make you feel better?"

He didn't look up. "You know one thing that bothers me?"

"What?"

"How long have you been living in this cabin?"

"Ever since I've been working on it. It just makes things easier."

"I think you're done now, Alex. You've got the floor down. You've got the woodstove working. As soon as I redo your trim, this place will be ready to rent out again."

"It's been a bad winter for the snowmobile people. You know that."

"You could have this place rented right now. It's your biggest cabin. You're just wasting money."

"Since when are you my accountant?"

He stopped what he was doing and sat still on the floor. He finally turned to look at me. "You need to move back into your cabin. You can't keep avoiding it."

"I will." It was my turn to look away. "As soon as I'm done here."

Vinnie didn't say anything else. I got down on my knees and helped him tear up the remaining strips of floor molding. An hour later I was on my way to Sault Ste. Marie to buy the new strips, five-eighths instead of half-inch, cloverleaf instead of quarter round. As I passed that first cabin, I made a point of not even looking at it.

That was how the day went. That last day in March. It started with

breakfast at the Glasgow Inn and ended with dinner in the same place. It was like most every other day in Paradise. Vinnie had helped me finish the baseboard trim, then he'd gone over to the rez to sit with his mother for a while. She'd not been feeling like herself lately. Maybe just one more person who was tired of winter. I was hoping that was it, that she'd feel better once the sun came back. That we'd all feel better.

Vinnie gave me a nod as he came through the door. Back from the rez, then a shift at the casino dealing blackjack, stopping in now because that's what you do around here. Every night. Jackie was watching hockey on the television mounted above the bar. Vinnie went over and stood behind him, just like I had told him to do.

"Hey, Jackie," he said, "I heard something interesting today."

"What's that, Vin?"

"Did you know Lake Superior isn't really the biggest lake in the world? Or the deepest?"

Jackie turned and glared at me.

"I'll throw you right out on your ass," he said. "I swear to God I will."

Finally, something to smile about, on a cold, cold night. I looked back into the fire and watched the flames dance. My last hour of peace until everything would change.

We're not supposed to believe in evil anymore, right? It's all about abnormal behavior now. Maladjustment, overcompensation, or my favorite, the antisocial personality disorder. Fancy words I was just starting to hear in that last year on the force, before I looked into the eyes of a madman as he pulled that trigger without even blinking.

In a way, I've never gotten past it. I'm still lying on that floor, watching the light in Franklin's eyes slowly going out. My partner, the man I was supposed to protect at all costs. Later, in the hospital, they pulled two slugs from my body and left the one that was too close to my heart to touch. It's been with me ever since, a constant reminder of the evil I saw that night, all those years ago on a warm summer evening in Detroit. You'd never convince me otherwise. No, I'd seen evil as deep as it could ever get.

But like Jackie and his beloved lake, you'd never know there was something deeper out there until somebody came to you and told you about. A deeper lake. A lake you've never seen before. Even then, you might not believe it. Not unless he took you there and showed it you.

It was about to happen. Minutes away, then seconds. Then the door opened and the cold air blew in and the last person I expected to see that night stepped inside, carrying a big problem and looking for my help.

Chapter Two

Chief Roy Maven stood in the doorway of the Glasgow Inn. He was out of uniform, but everything else about him—his clean-shaven face, his buzz cut, his hard eyes, his body language—gave him away as a lifelong cop. He blinked a few times as his eyes adjusted to the light, did a scan around the room, taking it all in. He finally saw me sitting by the fire and came over.

“Chief Maven,” I said. “What the hell?”

“McKnight. Can I sit down?”

I nodded to the other chair across from me, another overstuffed leather armchair angled toward the fire—just one more reason why a Scottish pub is a thousand percent better than your average American bar.

“This is nice,” he said. “I can see why you spend so much time here.”

“You knew to find me here?”

“Yeah, it’s been an exhausting search. First your cabin. Then your bar.”

“Are you gonna tell me why you’re here or not?”

He leaned forward in the chair and rested his forearms on his knees. He looked me in the eye and as he did I was already coming up with my own theory. You see, the chief and I had sort of gotten off to a rough start. Genuinely bad chemistry from the first time I laid eyes on him and he laid eyes on me. Then things just went downhill from there, until at one point, he promised me that the day he retired, he’d come out to Paradise to find me so we could settle things between us once and for all. No more badge in the way, just a couple of men who truly didn’t like each other, having it out in the parking lot. He was ten years older than me, maybe even fifteen. But I knew it wouldn’t be an easy fight. Not by a long shot.

“I came out here to ask for your help,” he said.

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for it to make sense. It didn’t happen.

“I didn’t want to call you,” he said. “I figured this is the kind of thing you need to do in person.”

Jackie wandered over at that point, a bar towel over this shoulder.

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Roy Maven,” I said, “Chief of Police in the Soo.”

“Okay,” Jackie said, reaching over to shake the man’s hand. “At

the risk of being indelicate... I was led to believe that you and Alex hate each other."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far. Just call it a persistent lack of liking each other."

Jackie looked at me for confirmation. I just shrugged.

"Well, as long as we're playing nice here, how 'bout we get you a beer. Alex? A Molson?"

"I'm fine, thanks," Maven said.

"You don't understand," Jackie said. "This is a real Molson, bottled in Canada. From Alex's personal stash. He doesn't drink anything else."

"McKnight, you drive all the way to Canada to get your beer?"

"Hell if he drives," Jackie said. "I do."

"Well, damn," Maven said. "In that case I'll have to have one. I am out of uniform, after all."

The evening is just about complete, I thought. All we need now is dinner and a movie.

He looked into the fire as we waited for Jackie to come back with the beer. When we both had our bottles, Maven tipped his back and took a long drink.

"That ain't bad," he said. "Not bad at all."

"So seriously," I said, "quit joking around and tell me why you're here."

"You really think I came all the way out here to have a beer with you? I meant what I said. I need your help."

"With what?"

He looked around the place, like somebody else might be listening in on our conversation. Then he pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"Can I smoke in here?"

"Jackie would prefer that you don't."

He put the cigarettes away. He fidgeted with his bottle for a few seconds, then he stood up.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go outside."

Now we're getting to it, I thought. He really did come here to fight.

"If I don't smoke a cigarette, I'm gonna kill someone," he said. "This is hard enough as it is, believe me."

I made him wait for a three count, then I finally got up and grabbed my coat. Who needs a comfortable chair in front of the fire when you can go freeze your ass off with a man you can't stand?

He opened the door and I followed him into the darkness. He took a few steps along the side of the building, staying out of the wind. He pulled out his cigarettes and his lighter. It was an old-school silver flip lighter. He cupped his hands around the end of his cigarette as he lit

it, then he snapped the lighter shut and put it in his pocket. He took a deep draw and let out a stream of smoke.

"So tell me what the hell's going on," I said.

"I told you this wasn't easy. So cut me some slack, eh? I came to ask you to do some work for a friend of mine."

"What kind of work?"

"You still have the private investigator's license?"

"I don't do that anymore."

"Do you still have the license or not?"

"It's a moot point, I told you I don't—"

"Okay, so you have the license. That's good."

"Maven, I swear to God..."

"Relax, McKnight. Will you just shut up for once and listen?"

Here's the situation. I've got this friend, Charles Razniewski.

Everybody calls him Raz. I used to ride with him a lot when I with the state police."

"When was that?"

"Hell, that was what, ten years ago now? I was getting sick of the politics so I left to try something else. Eventually ended up taking the job up here."

"The state police's loss was Sault Ste. Marie's gain, you mean."

"I told you to shut up, okay? So Raz, he ended up leaving, too, just before I did. But in his case he went federal. He's been a U.S. marshal ever since. Based down in Detroit. Your old stomping grounds."

"The marshals had an office on Lafayette. I wonder if he was there when I was."

"Small world, who knows. But here's the point of all this. He's got one kid, Charles Jr."

Maven stopped and looked out into the parking lot. The wind picked up and the pine trees started swaying.

"God damn," he said. "I mean to say, he *had* one kid. Here's the thing. You see, Charlie, he was going to school out at Michigan Tech. Just starting his last semester, right after Christmas break, he goes back up to school for some New Year's Eve party, and then..."

He stopped and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. I waited for him to get to what was obviously a hard thing to say.

"He hanged himself. From a tree. There was some alcohol in his system, I guess, but... I mean, he went out on his own and he drove down by the lake and he hanged himself."

"Did he leave a note?"

"No note. There usually isn't."

"I know, but..."

But nothing, I thought. The man was right. Despite everything you see in the movies, no matter how somebody kills himself, they almost

never leave a note.

"I can't imagine," he said. "I mean, if it was my daughter Olivia..."

He took another drag off his cigarette and looked away, shaking his head.

"I don't understand, Chief. I mean, this shouldn't happen to anybody. Your old friend or *anybody's* old friend. But what does this have to do with me?"

"This whole thing has been eating Raz alive, okay? He can't make any sense of it. If the kid was upset about something specific...about a girl or something. But no. He's just...gone. Like that."

"I still don't see how I can help here."

"He wants to know. That's all. If there's anything to know. He just wants to understand what was going through his kid's head before he died. That's all the man wants."

"How can anybody possibly know that?"

"Maybe you can't. Maybe this whole thing is just a waste of time. But he wants somebody to try. He's already talked to the Houghton County Sheriff's office, but they can't do anything more for him. It's not like they're gonna spend much more time on this. So he's thinking maybe if somebody talks to some of Charlie's friends..."

"Wait a minute, are you talking about me going out there and doing that?"

"He can't do it. There's no way he can go out there again. Not yet. Even if he could, there's not much chance they'd really be straight with him. There are some things you just can't talk about with your dead friend's father, you know?"

"But hold on. Time out."

"I can't do it. I've already talked to the sheriff out there. We didn't exactly hit it off, but no matter what, I can't go out there and start grilling people. I mean, I know how I can come across sometimes. I think any of these kids, they'd just feel like they were getting the third degree and there's no way they'd open up to me. What Raz needs is an impartial third party, somebody who's reasonably good at talking to people. And if he hires you on an official basis..."

"No. Chief, please. Even if I was going to do this, there's no way I'd take money for it."

"You're not getting it." He was starting to rock back and forth now, shivering from the cold and maybe something else. Some kind of raw energy he was trying to burn off. "Don't you see? He *needs* to hire you. He needs to pay you some money to go talk to these kids. Find out what you can about his son's state of mind. Talk to the sheriff's office, find out if there's anything else they can tell you. About any kind of trouble he might have been in. If he does that, then he's *doing something*. See what I mean? Paying you makes it real to him. So even

if you don't find out anything, he can go home feeling like he did everything he could."

"Why me?"

"Well, you've got the license."

"I don't use it. You know that. Why don't you hire Leon Prudell?"

He was the only other game in town. My former sometimes-partner, a man who grew up in the UP and who never wanted to be anything else other than a private investigator. Problem was, he was the fat goofy kid who sat in the back of the classroom and to most people around here, he'd never be anything else.

"Prudell's a clown," Maven said. "At least you *look* competent."

"Gee, thanks. But seriously, Prudell's a lot better than anybody realizes. He'd do a fantastic job with this."

"Look, McKnight, all you have to do is drive out there, talk to a few people, then drive back. Tell Raz what you heard. If that happened to be, 'You know what, your son wasn't depressed at all, there was absolutely no reason he should have killed himself, so it was just a tragic fluke thing, one bad night in his life and I'm awfully sorry....' Well, then, I mean if you said that, then everybody would be better off, I think."

"So now you're even telling me what to say? Why bother even going out there? I can just say I did."

"Don't be a wiseass. I'm just saying, if you don't find out anything, that would be a good line to take. Is that too much to ask?"

"Chief..."

"And you make your three hundred bucks. Or whatever. I don't see what the problem is."

"You're something else," I said. "You treat me like crap every time I see you, but now you think all you gotta do is wave some money in my face and I'll help you."

He threw his cigarette down onto the gravel and reached out for me. He grabbed me by the coat and drew himself to within a few inches of my face. Here we go, I thought. We're gonna have that fight in the parking lot after all.

"I'm not asking for me," he said, looking me dead in the eye. "I'm asking for my old friend, who's spent the last three months living in hell. Okay? He's going to be in my office tomorrow at ten o'clock. If it's not too much trouble, I'd like you to stop by and at least talk to him. Can you do that?"

"Just once, would it kill you to say please?"

I could feel him tightening his grip on my coat.

"Please, Alex. Okay? Please."

Then he pushed me away from him and turned to go.

"Ten o'clock," he said as he got into his car. "Don't be late."

Also by Steve Hamilton

Misery Bay

The Lock Artist

Night Work

A Stolen Season

Ice Run

Blood Is the Sky

North of Nowhere

The Hunting Wind

Winter of the Wolf Moon

A Cold Day in Paradise